

self-help

"Self-help" refers to a woman's use of a speculum, flashlight and mirror to view her own cervix and vagina for purposes of familiarity, screening of problems and demystifying of the medical procedure. The concept of self-help now includes self-breast exams and preventive health care information.

Classes and self-help presentations are an important part of feminist women's health clinics. In addition to learning about your own body, the group self-help experience, like Consciousness Raising, provides the opportunity to share attitudes about our bodies and experiences with health care. The way we view our bodies is an important aspect in how we view ourselves.

"Self-help, which emphasizes self-examination and self-knowledge, is an attempt to seize the 'technology' without buying the ideology. Self-help is not an alternative to confronting the medical system with the demands for reform of existing institutions. Self-help, or more generally, self-knowledge, is critical to that confrontation."

—Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English from
Complaints and Disorders

"One thing we have found to be true in the Self-Help Clinic, and it is not at all in a light or amusing tone that we say this, but heterosexuality is a serious health hazard for women at this point in time."

—Frances Hornstein

"If the heterosexism of most doctors makes it a personal risk for a lesbian to come out, or if out, talk frankly about her lovemaking styles, then knowledge of how vaginal infections, VD, or other illnesses are passed from woman to woman will not become known."

—Mary O'Donnell

"If a lesbian has gonorrhea or syphilis, chances are there has been a penis in the picture somewhere."

—a woman VD counselor for the
Public Health Department

"The medical system is not just a service industry. It is a powerful instrument of social control, replacing organized religion as a prime source of sexist ideology and an enforcer of sex roles. Certainly, it is not the only haven of institutional sexism in our society—the educational system may be equally important or even more important. But it has the unique authority to judge who is sick and who is well, who is fit and who is unfit. The presumed scientific basis of medicine lends credibility to these judgments, yet as we have seen, the judgments themselves have no consistent basis in biology."

—Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English
from Complaints and Disorders



self-health for lesbian women

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Introduction

For Lesbians, finding competent and sensitive treatment within the traditional health care establishment seems nearly impossible. Most doctors still assume that the women they see are heterosexual and in need of birth control, and they are ill-prepared to deal with the health needs of Lesbians. Very little, if any, research has been done into the special health concerns of Lesbians, and so there is only a minimal amount of information available to those who need it most. And of course, behind the assumption that all women are relating to men is the attitude that Lesbians are somehow sick and tragic people, which leaves many Lesbians fearful of seeking health care from a medical establishment that degrades and dismisses their sexual orientation.

It is up to us as Lesbians to share what knowledge we have with each other, to conduct our own research into our health needs where that knowledge is lacking, and to communicate relevant information to health care providers. Feminist women's health clinics are important places for us right now because they are making an attempt to provide non-oppressive health care experiences to Lesbians, either through the establishment of Lesbian gyn clinics and study groups, or by refusing to assume that the women who come to them are all heterosexual. Patient advocacy—taking someone along with you to the doctor's office to act as your advocate—is also an important concept for us. Doctors are intimidating enough to all of us, but as Lesbians we are particularly vulnerable to attacks and invalidating remarks on our sexuality (lifestyle). Knowing our rights as patients, and having an informed friend along to support us and help us in asking questions and getting answers can make all the difference between a frustrating power confrontation and an educational, informative experience.

taking control of our bodies and our health

Just as being a Lesbian does not mean only our sexual behavior, so does being a woman not mean only our vaginas, uteri or breasts, although we have been treated that way for decades by the medical profession. We can't just zero in on one part of the body, treat it and be healthy. We must be aware of our whole body and our total living habits: getting more exercise, eating more whole natural foods, avoiding toxic drugs, tobacco, alcohol, etc., learning to relax and release tension, getting sufficient rest and becoming aware of alternative treatments to drugs and surgery, such as herbs, vitamins, acupuncture/pressure, naturopathy, holistic healing, polarity and yoga.

A positive view of exercise is a first step for women who want to give attention to their whole bodies. As Lesbians, we have faced a double bind of sorts when it comes to sports and games: on the one hand, we are freer to pursue exercise, because we are free of hangups about pleasing men; but we are also vulnerable to the derogatory way in which women athletes are seen who have "short hair and big muscles." Of course no one stops to think that short hair is certainly more convenient and that good muscle tone is a natural result of exercise. More and more women are learning to shrug off the fact that many men—and the culture in general—are threatened by the sight of strong and able women, and are going on to do their thing regardless of stereotypes.

The human body profits greatly from at least thirty minutes of continual exercise daily. What form that exercise takes will depend on each woman's daily schedule and past experience. Swimming and running are two excellent ways to move that affect both muscle tone and the body's cardiovascular and digestive systems. They can also be done alone and fit into a busy schedule much more easily than a game of basketball or soccer. On the other hand, many Lesbian communities consider group sports a good way to socialize and meet people, and so there are opportunities for softball, volleyball, football and other games which keep us moving. Whatever games or activities we choose to participate in, if we can do them at least 3 times a week, we will be contributing greatly to our overall fitness and well-being, both mental and physical.

Diet is another basic part of keeping ourselves well. This culture teaches us that we must regularly eat huge amounts of meat and dairy products in order to be healthy, but what it doesn't tell us is that the meat and dairy industries are getting rich while consumers suffer more and more from degenerative diseases linked to our massive intake of these foods.* We can get more than enough proteins, carbohydrates, minerals and vitamins for our bodies by cutting down or eliminating meat from our diets and eating more fresh fruits and vegetables, combined with whole grains, seeds, nuts, and cheeses. What we put into our bodies makes a large difference in how we function, not only physically but mentally and emotionally as well.

**This is particularly tragic when applied to the poor, who are told that without a slab of meat on the table at every meal they will be nutritionally deficient. Yet meat is one of the most expensive foods to buy!*

**resources

LESBIAN HEALTH CARE by Frances Hornstein. Available for \$1 from the Feminist Women's Health Center, 1112 Crenshaw, Los Angeles, CA 90019.

LESBIAN HEALTH CARE: ISSUES & LITERATURE by Mary O'Donnell. Available from Santa Cruz Women's Health Center, 250 Locust St., Santa Cruz, CA 95060

THE LESBIAN READER—"Radical Reproduction: X Without Y" by Laurel Galana. Amazon Press, Oakland, CA 94618.

AFTER YOU'RE OUT—"Information on VD for Gay Women and Men" by Julian Bamford. Book by Karla Jay and Allen Young. Links Books, New York.

"Infections of the Vagina" prepared by HealthRight, Inc., 175 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10010.

HYGIEIA, A WOMAN'S HERBAL by Jeannine Parvati. Bookpeople, 2940 7th Street., Berkeley, CA 94710.

"Mucus Method Pamphlet" by the Emma Goldman Clinic, 715 N. Dodge, Iowa City, IA 52240. Also, information on Basal Body Temperature and cervical caps may be requested.

"Herpes" by the Santa Cruz Women's Health Collective, 250 Locust Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95060.

self-health for lesbian women

beginning note

Since research has not been done on Lesbians and our unique health needs in regard to how and what we can contract from each other, the following information is, in part, very sketchy. Our major source of information is from "Lesbian Health Care," reprinted with permission from Frances Hornstein. It is limited to the coverage of ways in which VD and common vaginal and bladder infections can be transmitted between women. More details of symptoms, treatment and detection of these conditions can be found in the resources listed below.**

vaginitis (inflammation and infection of the vagina)

yeast (monilia, candida albicans)

Yeast is a common fungus which grows normally in harmless quantities on the skin and in the mouth, vagina and large intestine of many, if not most, healthy people. Yeast can grow rapidly within the vagina and then spread to the vulva, causing intense vaginal and vulval itching which may be severe enough to interfere with sleep, lovemaking and many other activities. The vagina becomes red and dry and may remain so even when you are sexually excited. Vaginal discharge is heavy, thick, white, and curdy and smells like baking bread. Sometimes there is a burning sensation after urination.

Sexual contact is an occasional cause of yeast. Women can pass yeast back and forth from oral-genital sex because a candida infection called "thrush" can develop in the throat. An overgrowth of yeast can also be promoted by being tired, run down, in bad health, or by eating an overly alkaline diet. Wearing cotton or no underwear can help prevent yeast by allowing the vagina to "breathe." If a woman does cervical self-exam regularly, she can know the changes in her vagina and may be able to recognize yeast in its early stages and begin treating it.

Eating plain, unsweetened yogurt may help prevent the growth of yeast in the digestive system, intestines, and anus, from which yeast sometimes spreads to the vagina. This is especially important



venereal disease

gonorrhea

Gonorrhea is the second most common communicable disease in the United States. It is estimated that 80% of women who have gonorrhea do not have symptoms and so may not become aware of the disease until it has progressed to a pelvic inflammatory disease, an infection of the uterus and fallopian tubes.

"The chances of a lesbian contractant gonorrhea are very slim. If your community is fairly closed and you know accurately who is relating with whom, you can feel safe from venereal disease. However, if there are women in your community who relate sexually to men or who relate to women who are bisexual, or if any women have been raped, then there is a chance that you could be exposed to VD. Even though the chance is there, it is still more difficult for lesbians to transmit VD than for heterosexual people. Gonorrhea germs must live in a warm, moist environment and can survive for only a few seconds in the air. Gonorrhea can thrive in the vagina, the rectum or the throat. The germs can be passed two possible ways: oral-genital contact, or possibly — although not likely — by moist fingers from your partner to yourself or vice versa."

— F.H.

From the time the blisters appear to the time they heal over, you can transmit Herpes by contact of the mucous membranes, that is, moist fingers, tongues, hands and genitals. Although the two types of Herpes are caused by two different viruses from the same family, a woman with type I can transmit genital Herpes to her lover via oral-genital contact. This occurs in the general population in about 5% of all type II cases. It is also possible to be contagious without any symptoms, but it is uncertain how often this happens.

The Herpes virus remains in the body permanently, and an attack can recur anytime. Herpes can be brought on by poor general health, an unhealthy diet (especially a lack of B-vitamins), and a high amount of stress; so taking good care of yourself is one way to prevent the onset of Herpes.

reproduction

artificial insemination

Lesbians who want to have children yet do not want to have intercourse with a man have a choice with artificial insemination (AI). And within the choice of AI, there are several alternatives. Finding a doctor who will perform the AI knowing that you're a Lesbian may be difficult and also expensive. Doing it with a donor that you know (or several) may require legalities concerning custody rights, etc. If you decide to find your own donor and want to do the AI with a lover or friend, the only equipment needed is a speculum and a syringe or cervical cap. Insert the speculum, fill the syringe with seminal fluid and then insert most of it into the os (the opening to the uterus) and the rest into the vagina. If a tampon or sponge is put in after the speculum has been removed, it may help in keeping more of the seminal fluid in. Or a cervical cap may be used by filling it with the seminal fluid and then fitting it over the cervix.

It is important to use the sperm soon after collecting it, unless you are able to store it via a sophisticated method of freezing; and daylight does irreparable damage, so keep it out of the sun. It is important to know when you are in the most fertile stage of your cycle. Ovulation — the rupture of the egg from the



Leo and Diane Dillon ©81

In the Spirit

IT'S TIME TO RISE!

Whatever it is you want in life, this is the time to go for it. Right now! We're witnessing the reemergence of First People—people of color all over the world are moving up. No one can deny that this is the most incredible time ever to be a woman. Both are in our favor. That puts us Black women, First Women, in a wonderful place. In fact, in our blood is a cumulative will to rise, garnered from many generations.

Today, the challenges in our lives must be used as opportunities to rise. The more difficult the challenge, the greater the opportunity to grow. I know that. The breakup of my marriage actually grew me. Forced me to rise, to stand on my own two feet. Meeting the responsibilities of bringing home the beans and keeping a roof over my child's head anchored me. It taught me how to sacrifice, stretch a dollar; it built my self-confidence too. It's crystal clear to me—if I can raise a child alone, I can do anything! So can you.

To rise, we must hold a vision of ourselves spreading our wings, reaching for the sky, saying "I can." It's the basic law of life: we attract to us the things we expect, think about and hold in our mental attitude. But self-criticism and focusing on what we don't have can keep us marking time. Makes us prisoners, limiting our use in the world.

If you're living below your standard, get busy devising a concise creative plan to lift yourself out of that condition and find joy in the steady toil it takes to do it. If your work is not satisfying, be about improving your skills to move up to a better job. If your relationships are not healthy and constructive, choose to rise beyond the people who limit you and surround yourself with folk who encourage you to

stretch yourself. Whatever it is you decide you want, stand up for it!

Certainly each of us has different things to deal with on our agenda. But there are also other issues that need our collective attention. How do we permit government retrenchment of programs that feed the needy while the fat cats benefit from new tax breaks? Where is the outcry against a political philosophy that consigns our young to substandard education, our men and women to unemployment and our elders to consider dog food as a culinary choice? Complacency is not the answer—the victims are our own. It's time to rise—to confront the conditions that threaten the existence of each and every one of us. Let's face it. In a capitalist system control of capital should be a large part of our focus. It's our time to gain greater economic power and to use that power to right our future. Let's take our entrepreneurial ideas off the shelf and step aggressively into the business arena with the commitment to recirculate those dollars through Black hands whenever possible. If you've got a "better idea," this is the time to build on it. Do your homework. Learn the market. Know your facts. Put some divine order in front of your endeavor, and physical and mental vigor behind it, and make it real. And if your idea doesn't work, don't give up. Analyze what went wrong; try it again or try something new.

Do we ever know what we can do unless we try? We can change our lives. We can change our communities. We can change the nation. Ultimately, we can change this world.

To everything there is a season. This time it's our time to rise!

Susan L. Taylor

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

when one is taking antibiotics such as tetracycline. Also, applying plain, unsweetened yogurt into the vagina can help restore the healthy bacteria which keeps yeast in check.

the yogurt cure — history of self-help

Carol Downer, founder of the Feminist Women's Health Center in Los Angeles, was accused by an undercover policewoman of diagnosing a vaginal infection and of prescribing and applying yogurt as a cure. She was acquitted, but the lesson/warning is there — women taking control of their bodies, whether it be through abortion or learning and sharing self-help toward the replacement of the predominantly male medical profession is a political issue for all women. Downer, by the way, is the originator of the self-help clinic concept of women doing their own cervical self-exams with the use of the speculum.

trichomonas

"Trichomonas is a protozoan which causes many of the same symptoms as yeast — Inflamed and itchy mucous membranes in the vagina. 'Trich' can also be passed between women who have sexual contact — on fingers that are moist with secretions. It may also be possible to transmit 'trich' by sharing towels which are moist and can sustain the trichomonads."

— F.H.

bladder infections or cystitis

Cystitis is the medical term for a bladder infection. One very common cause of both vaginal infections and cystitis is bacteria from the rectum infecting the vagina or urethra. Wiping yourself from front to back after urinating or defecating will avoid introducing bacteria. Avoiding finger contact of the vagina after having anal sexual contact will also keep bacteria from the rectum from possibly causing an infection.

If you are prone to bladder infections, drink lots of fluids, specifically cranberry juice. (Cranberry juice has hippuric and mandelic acids, which are what the drug companies make their chemicals for cystitis treatment from.) This keeps flushing bacteria out of your urethra and helps prevent the ascending infection. Also, urinate after sexual contact, including masturbation, to flush the urethra.

syphilis

"Syphilis is a great deal less common than gonorrhea. Again, it is extremely rare for lesbians to have syphilis. The earliest sign of syphilis is a chancre, a small sore that looks like a punched-out piece of skin, which lasts for about a week and then disappears. The disease stays in the body even if there are no symptoms. Syphilis is spread by contact with the chancre. In women, the chancre usually appears on the vaginal lips and on any of the mucous membranes of the vagina or cervix. Doing vaginal self-examination with a plastic speculum, a mirror, and a light enhances the chance that a woman will see a chancre, but it is not a guarantee that the chancre will be seen. The chancre can appear on the mouth if there has been oral-genital contact, or in or around the anus. The only way that syphilis could be passed to a part of the body which is not a mucous membrane is if there is a cut or an abrasion which would come in contact with the chancre. I have never spoken with anyone who has ever heard of a lesbian contracting syphilis from another woman. The possibility of this happening will have to be determined by our own experience and those of other women in our communities."

— F.H.

venereal warts

"Venereal warts, which are small cauliflower-shaped warts, can be passed by close contact between two women. The exact way they are transmitted is not known, since women who have had no sexual contact with anyone who has had warts have developed them. They can be located on the mucous membranes of the outer genitals — vaginal lips, clitoris or the perineum — the area between the vaginal opening and the anus."

— F.H.

herpes simplex I and II

Herpes simplex is a virus which affects the mucous membranes and the skin. Herpes type I causes common cold sores or fever blisters on the lips, mouth and face, while Herpes type II causes sores on and around the genitals.

Herpes II sores are grayish, moist blisters with red edges. They occur in women on the labia, clitoris, the opening to the vagina, the cervix, perineum, and sometimes on the thighs and around the anus.

wall of the ovary — usually takes place within twenty-four hours of the last day of stretchy, or fertile-type mucus. Ovulation can be determined by checking vaginal mucus and basal body temperature daily. See the other side of this pamphlet for where to write for more information on these methods of aiding fertilization.

Research has been done to find techniques for determining the sex of the fetus prior to conception. Some of these techniques can be applied to artificial insemination. First there is about an 80% chance that a female will be conceived if the AI is performed 36-48 hours before the egg is released from the ovary. Also, preceding AI with an acidic douche of two tablespoons of white vinegar in a quart of water gives higher chances for a female. Conversely, a higher alkalinity would produce a male. "The alkalinity of the uterus is greatly increased by orgasm — if you enjoy it, you're going to add to your chances of having a boy."

— Laurel Galana

parthenogenesis

Parthenogenesis is the creation of a fetus without the use of sperm. How it works is uncertain. Proving it is virtually impossible in humans, although several species of other animals have reproduced parthenogenetically in nature and under controlled laboratory conditions. In essence, a woman's ovum "thinks" it's been fertilized, and it creates a human being — female, of course. Our present day "scientific" (read "male") thinking automatically assumes that only sperm can fertilize ovum. Parthenogenetic reproduction challenges that and, incidentally, removes the biological necessity for having two sexes.

final words

It is necessary that women reading this pamphlet understand that there has been little research in the area of Lesbian Health Care. What is contained here is merely a brief beginning, a start. It is the responsibility of the reader to check out further information. Specifically in the artificial insemination, it will be necessary to check out more information on determining your time of ovulation. Also, because of the lack of space, we did not go into a discussion of the problems that Lesbians encounter in therapy and psychoanalysis.



